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REPORT ON STATUS OF STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN THE AFRICA EAST DIVISION

by

W.J. Absaloms
Director of Surveys, Kenya

Abstract

The paper reviews the status of standardization of geographical names in the Africa East Division. It presents the benefits that accrue from standardization of geographical names not only to Africa but also to the rest of the world. It further stresses that for standardization of geographical names to flourish in the Division, regular bilateral and multilateral meetings and training are a pre-requisite; this is of course also true for the whole of Africa and the rest of the world.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The development of National Committees on Standardization of Geographical Names has grown steadily in the Africa East Division. This has been greatly necessitated by the fact that most of the countries are multi-tribal. And, one element of effective communication is the ability to refer to particular places, features and areas on the surface of the earth. This can only be accomplished by the use of geographical names, a reference system found in every known language. Names, however, can vary in selection, spelling and application between different users of the names.

2. Realizing the importance of standardization of geographical names, the United Nations, since 1960, sanctioned the functioning within its framework of a group of experts promoting the international standardization of geographical names. The group, now called the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), working in close co-operation with the United Nations Secretariat, has so far organized international conferences normally known as United Nations International Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNICSGN). Since 1968, the UNGEGN, whose work is accomplished by working groups, has been meeting about once every two years; on the other hand, UNICSGN, whose work is similarly accomplished by working groups, has held its conferences about every five years. Now, because of its international nature, the United Nations was considered to be the logical place to co-ordinate and encourage the international standardization of names.

3. And, linguistic/geographical divisions were formed in order to implement the recommendations of the resolutions adopted at the United Nations Conferences at both national and international levels.

4. Africa is divided into three divisions as follows:

(a) Africa Central Division: The Division comprises Angola, Burundi, the Central Africa Republic, Chad, the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Cameroon and Zaire;

(b) Africa East Division: It comprises Botswana, Comoros, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, Swaziland, Uganda, the United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe;

(c) Africa West Division: The Division comprises Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde,the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, the Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo; and

(d) It is to be noted that African Arab countries have been put together with other Arab nations to form Arabic Division. (Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, the Libyian Arab Jamahiriya, Morocco, Somalia, the Sudan, Tunisia).

II. CONTRIBUTIONS OF STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES TO DEVELOPMENT

5. The following benefits are not only relevant to Africa but also to the rest of the world:

(a) Cartography is in constant process of development due to newly acquired techniques and technologies. The different variables in the development of cartography develop at varying degrees. Geographical names is one such variable. Geographical names, in their written form, are a vital part of a map. It is inconvenable that maps could function as a viable communication system without the use of names. Standardization of geographical names thus enhances cartographic development;

(b) The national standardization of geographical names fixes the geographical names of a nation in a linguistically correct form. The result is a cultural achievement since the names fixed on maps and gazetteers represent an important source for any research into historical patterns of settlement or into economic and ethnic history. Fixing geographical names in multilingual areas is a cultural and political task of major importance for the co-existence of language groups in a nation. The value of the names will depend on how carefully and painstakingly the names have been collected and recorded;

(c) The standardization of geographical names plays a major role in transport and communications, both national and international. This necessitates that each significant place, feature or area of a country must necessarily have an acknowledged and unequivocal name, along with variants in regions that are legally multilingual. It is then that international timetables for airlines and railways become implementable with definite place names;

(d) Standardized names imply accurate names information and names data bases. This is of social, economic and political importance; with definite place names no resources are wasted by government, industry, commerce, business, citizens, etc., in verification. Definite place names are particularly useful to famine relief teams, fire-fighting and rescue teams and similar disaster-control operations;

(e) Standardization of geographical names enhances international co-operation. There is a lot that each nation gains in participating with other nations in the United Nations meetings on standardization of geographical names;

(f) National standardization of geographical names allows each country to exercise prerogative to determine its own official names. A nation would consequently contribute to the international standardization, particularly on features which cross the borders and those beyond a sovereignty; for instance, maritime and undersea features.

III. ACHIEVEMENT IN THE AFRICA EAST DIVISION

6. Standardization of geographical names nas reached various stages in the countries forming the Africa East Division. It is at this point pertinent to review the achievements of each country in the Division.

A. The Republic of Kenya

7. The activities of standardization of geographical names have continued in the Republic. All new names which have been collected during the up-dating of topographical maps have been processed by the standing committee on geographical names and included in the printed maps. It is estimated that approximately 9,000 place names or 250 maps sheets have been dealt with in the last five or so years. A revision copy of the gazetteer and a card index system for new and amended names continue to be maintained for the purposes of publishing the third edition of the gazetteer. And, a small gazetteer has been compiled for the fourth edition of the National Atlas; it contains approximately 2,000 place names which appear in the atlas.

8. The standing committee on standardization of geographical names is presently involved in the preparation of Toponymic Guidelines for Map and other Editors.

B. The Republic of Botswana

9. The Place Name Commission was established by a Presidential Directive (CAB 51/67) dated 11 October 1967, and the Surveyor-General was appointed Chairman of the Commission. By December 1970, the Commission had met 26 times and discussed 1,043 names. By July 1981, the Commission had held 77 formal meetings at which over 2500 names were discussed; it also published a second list of Names and Recommended Spellings.

C. The Republic of Malawi

10. Malawi has not as yet set up any national committee on the standardization of geographical names and hence the exercise on standardization of names has not been embarked upon. There is all the same a need for proceedings of conferences on geographical names to be sent to Malawi for dissemination of information.

D. The People's Republic of Mozambique

11. The Republic is experiencing some problems with the names along its borders where the neighbouring countries do not recognize its (Mozambique's) official version of the names. It intends to publish a coded booklet in alphabetical order

listing all the names in its national atlas. If the list will be too valuminous then a computer-assisted system may be employed. The Republic is keen on international standardization of names and hopes that some day standardized geographical names, symbols, conventions and letters will be published for Eastern Africa in particular and Africa in general. Mozambique has also shown great interest in short training courses in toponym and hope that it will be invited to participate.

E. Swaziland

12. Swaziland has a Place Names Committee but it has not met for years.

13. The Surveyor-General's office plans to reconstruct the 31 sheets of 1:50,000 scale mapping and the names on these were compiled in the early 1950s by the British Directorate of Colonial Surveys. The Surveyor-General has no information as to the sources of these names. The major overhaul proposed for the map series would be an ideal opportunity to correct and complete the place names.

14. It is hoped that the Swaziland Place Names Committee will be revived and that an accurate list of place names in Swaziland can be compiled. Possibly this list could also include translations of the Siswati names and the source of names of European or other origins.

F. United Republic of Tanzania

15. Since the fourth Conference at Geneva in 1982, the Surveys and Mapping Division of the Ministry of Lands, Natural Resources and Tourism has managed to put through Parliament an act for the establishment of a National Geographical Names Standardization Committee, Act No. 23 of 1982. The Committee was formally established with 18 members effective 13 June 1983 and for a term of three years which ran out. It is to be noted that various recommendations of this first Committee are still under consideration. The second Committee was to be formed to continue with the tasks left uncompleted by the first one.

G. The Republic of Uganda

16. Regrettably, since the last Conference in Athens in 1977, Uganda has been passing through a difficult political era which has not been conducive to undertaking any constructive mapping programme. However, it is hoped that in the near future the District Standing Committees on Standardization of Geographical Names will be revitalized as the Department of Surveys and Mapping launches new mapping programmes.

H. The Republic of Zambia

17. Zambia has not done much in the area of the Standardization of Geographical Names. However, the Government appointed a Standing Committee in 1978 whose terms of reference were to advise the Government on matters relating to geographical nomenclature in Zambia. The Committee is composed of surveyors, geographers, cartographers, historians, linguists and administrators.

18. Ever since the Committee was appointed, much of its work has been confined to the revision of the National Gazetteer of Geographical Names which was last published in 1966.

19. In addition to the revision, the Committee is working towards the direction of re-organizing the local sub-committees at both provincial and district levels in order to effectively formulate the policies of the standardization of names in the country. But it is regrettably observed that the Committee's work is being retarded due to lack of enthusiasm on the part of the appropriate authority towards its effectiveness.

20. However, efforts are being made by the Surveys Department to re-organize the Committee and stimulate the higher authorities on the importance of standardizing geographical place names in the country. According to the Standing Committee's plans, it is to increase the names from the present 35,000 contained in the 1966 edition to about 45,000 names.

I. The Republic of Zimbabwe

21. Zimbabwe has a Geographical Names Standing Committee (GNSC) of which the Surveyor-General is Chairman. The activities of GNSC can be illustrated from the extracts of the Surveyor-General's annual report for 1986, in which he stated:

(a) "The Geographical Names Standing Committee had two meetings during the year. One was a special meeting held just three days after the regular GNSC meeting to check names submitted by the Cabinet Committee on Place Names (CCPN);

(b) Spellings of 1,339 names were checked on the preparatory lists and CCPN. Of these, 1,217 were verified and 122 were referred back to District Administration and GNSC for more information on meaning of place names."

22. Zimbabwe has not in any way been associated with the past Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

J. The Republic of Seychelles

23. Following a decision of the Council of Ministers of the Seychelles, on the 14 August 1980, the Ministry of Planning and Development and the Ministry of Education and Information were mandated to "deal with the prevalence of invented names of localities in Seychelles". A small committee was therefore formed to review and, where necessary, revise the place names of Seychelles which consists of 115 small islands.

24. The committee met for the first time on the 18 October 1980, and since then, has been meeting fortnightly.

25. The committee has produced a revised list of the island names and is on the point of completing a review of place names of the various islands of the Republic, including those of the outlying coral islands. The main review work has been in connection with the main islands of Mahe, Praslin and La Digue.

26. It plans to compile a toponymic dictionary of Seychelles place names once it will have completed its review work.

K. Socialist Ethiopia

27. The Standardization of Geographical Names forms part of the list of priorities of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

L. Other Member Countries of the Division

28. No information has been received from some member countries of the Division, namely Lesotho, Madagascar and Mauritius; however, it is expected that activities in the field of geographical names are going on within the countries.

M. Review of the Status in the Division

29. From the brief reports above it can be noted that nearly all the countries of the Division have got official activities related to standardization of geographical names. Consequently, they must have been aware of the benefits to be derived from standardization of geographical names. Kenya, as Chairman of the Division, has constantly contacted the members to appraise them on the activities of the UNGEGN and UNICSGN particularly the resolutions of the two institutions.

IV. REVITALIZATION OF STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN AFRICA EAST DIVISION

A. Holding of Regular Meetings

30. It has been noted in the Division that governments are not giving the National Names Authorities required backing - particularly financial. This is understandable since there are other more urgent projects competing for the limited funds. Again, those in the top management in the government some times are not aware of the socio-economic benefits to be derived from the National Committee on Geographical Names. In this regard, Kenya as Chairman of the Division, will endeavour to encourage regular bilateral and multilateral meetings so that the benefits derived can be publicised to those in top management and the general public. The meetings would help in both reactivating the existing National Committees and in creating new ones in the nations where they do not exist. In this way, conducive environment would be created in which resolutions of the United Nations International Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names could be implemented.

B. Training

31. Training in standardization of geographical names is very important. For instance, the personnel involved in the collection of names information should have adequate training to enable them to deal with linguistic problems.

32. Training is also required in office treatment of names, toponymy, gazetteer production, automatic data processing and laws and regulations relating to the management of geographical names.

33. In the fifth United Nations International Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held in Montreal, Canada, in August 1987, Kenya reiterated its intention made at the twelfth session of the Group of Experts on Geographical Names held at Geneva, Switzerland, in 1986, to hold a training course in Nairobi, Kenya for the Africa East Division. It is still keen on holding the course.

34. It is also important to stress that the proceedings of the various United Nations conferences and seminars on geographical names be disseminated to all the members so that they are constantly aware of what is going on, particularly resolutions which need implementation.

V. CONCLUSION

35. In conclusion, when discussing cartography in Africa, standardization of geographical names should not be forgotten. Currently, tangible development is discernible in standardization of geographical names in Africa East Division. In order to catalyze the development, regular such regional conferences, seminars, workshops, training sessions are a pre-requisite. It is in these conferences, seminars, etc., that the United Nations should play a key role particularly as far as support funds are concerned; many African countries cannot afford to send their nationals to attend such meetings because of lack of funds.

36. It is hoped that in the near future every African country will have a legal strong National Committee on Geographical Names which can produce linguistically correct names and maintain a gazetteer for the country.

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